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Fictional works, of different literary periods, which share a common perception of man can be explicated and compared with each other to illustrate a continuing tradition in American literature. Such a basis for comparison exists between Hawthorne's romance, "The Scarlet Letter," which appeared in 1850, and Henry James' fantasy, "The Beast in the Jungle," published 53 years later. Both works attempt to portray the "essential truth of the human heart" by evoking an awareness of the common doom or destiny that all men share in their isolation from each other, an isolation aggravated by the sin of pride. Although differences in surface structure, psychological point of view, use of symbol and image, and methods of execution exist between the two works, each novelist places his characters in a situation which dramatizes the effect of erring, but free-willed, action. (JB)

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The Continuity of American Letters in "The Scarlet Letter" and "The Beast in the Jungle"

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The possibility of comparing fictions of different literary periods becomes probability--and a rewarding one--when one finds an underlying perception of man that is common to both. This is found in Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter and in Henry James's The Beast in the Jungle, and it illustrates a continuing tradition in American letters. Hawthorne wrote his piece in 1850 and called it a romance, James wrote his in 1903 and called it a fantasy, and the writers are critically categorized as romanticist and realist. However, both works consider motives and psychological tensions as essential to human action, and they also illustrate values that are primarily moral or spiritual.[1] This paper will sound the notes of The Scarlet Letter and examine The Beast in the Jungle for echoes. It will consider theories and their execution in artistic control. Emphasis will be placed on The Beast in the Jungle.

James wrote the life of Hawthorne for the American Men of Letters Series in 1879, but if there are a few critics who over-emphasize the influence of Hawthorne on him,[2] there is little evidence that James studied Hawthorne as he did Europeans. Yet the writers share a continuing tradition in American letters. James's appraisal of The Scarlet Letter will be mentioned later, but he recognized Hawthorne as the first true American artist, and he admired his works because they give, as he wrote, "glimpses of a great field, of the whole deep mystery of man's soul and conscience. They are moral, and their interest is moral; they deal with something more than the mere accidents and conventionalities, the surface occurrences of life."[3] This is initial evidence of the underlying perceptions the authors had

in common. Later, in 1897, in another critique of Hawthorne, James concluded that Hawthorne characteristically dipped "into the moral world without being in the least a moralist."[4]

An oversimplification can introduce the literary theory of each. Hawthorne thought that fiction began with a moral idea; James thought it began with a picture and ended with an idea. These theories confirm their mutual concern for ideas and values and hint at a difference in treatment, in execution. As far as the execution of the art form is concerned, Hawthorne distinguished between a novel and a romance in his Preface to the House of Seven Gables, concluding that if a romance is true to the "essential truth in the human heart," it could use a certain license in inventing, selecting and arranging materials "to heighten effects."[5]

In his essay, "The Art of Fiction," James did not distinguish between a novel and a romance but only between a good or a bad novel. The good novel has "an immense and exquisite correspondence with life," and a bad one fails in execution to achieve this correspondence. Distortion in either direction--Pollyanna or Zola--results in a bad novel.[6] Thus in their theories, Hawthorne and James agree on values in life and literature--"essential truth" and "correspondence with life"--but disagree on the execution of the work of art.

The familiar themes of The Scarlet Letter and The Beast in the Jungle require here only quick review: for the one that sin has a lasting effect on human nature and for the other that there is tragedy in the "failure to accept or recognize a deep experience in life until too late."[7] Both themes, therefore, deal with more than external action and both dramatize the effects of erring but free-willed action.

To execute their ideas, Hawthorne and James chose settings and times for their fictions which contrast: the historic and specific Boston of 1647-54 of Hawthorne's work is different from a London of James's era which is purposely vague to focus attention on the characters.

What happens to the characters placed in these situation is developed through structure and through the manner of telling the story. The difference in length is obvious. More important is the difference in emphasis and the points of view from which the fictions are told. Hawthorne is an omniscient narrator, and he frequently gives his opinion on the characters and on the action. His story is unified primarily through the symbolic scaffold about which much has been written. In addition, the chapters of The Scarlet Letter show structural divisions for emphasis. Chapters I through VII focus on the Puritan community and its disapproval; Chapters IX through XIII emphasize Chillingworth's responsibility; Chapters XIII through XX are keyed to Hester; from

Chapter XXI to the end it is Dimmesdale's spotlight.

In sharp contrast is the unfolding of the sparse action--in six chapters--of The Beast in the Jungle. Its execution shows the success of a point of view which James used to give the impression of reality. The story is told from the point of view of Marcher only, and its structure is built from his re-meeting May Bartram and recalling her association with his problem. It concludes with her death. Nothing is revealed except through Marcher's thoughts and observations, and since he is sensitive, the effect is a sensitive and accumulating realization. The subtlety is in James's revelation of his own idea even though he assumes Marcher's point of view for the telling.

Though quite different in setting, point of view and focus of attention, there are some similarities in the works. In both, the instigating action happened before the effect is revealed in the characters. In The Scarlet Letter, the adultery had occurred before Hester emerges from prison; in The Beast in the Jungle, Marcher had told May Bartram of his presentiment ten years before they re-meet. Each work has a scene in which the fading heroine glows for a moment. In Chapter XVII of The Scarlet Letter, "Hester in the Forest," Hester throws away her scarlet letter and takes off her cap to show her hair--and displays her beauty. In Chapter IV of The Beast in the Jungle, May becomes youthful and graceful when she almost offers herself to Marcher in the poignant scene culminating in her "It's never too late."[8] It is a key moment, a counter theme is offered, and it is also the confirmation then for her of what she knows the beast to be. And because of Marcher's egotistic reaction, the reader also knows. The ending of both works is in a cemetery. But these are surface similarities only.

There is also the suggestive--yet functional--use of names in The Beast in the Jungle which has been noted. Marcher suggests the bleakness of early spring, and May suggest the vitality and bloom of late spring. There is a like suggestion in the names of Chillingworth and Dimmesdale. In both works, the heroines are strong characters, hinting at a common head and heart theme in their relationships to the men in the fictions. Both Marcher and Chillingworth illustrate the futility of the head alone. It is Chillingworth's intellectuality which is ultimately responsible for the tragedy, and it is the tragedy of Marcher that his inability to feel is what sets him apart from other men, that this lack of passion is the crouching animal that lay in his hallucinated jungle.

Psychological tensions give to each fiction the quality they have in common, and old-as-man pride is the basis. Pride is at the side of Chillingworth when he sees Hester on the scaffold, and it motivates Dimmesdale into withholding his confession until after the success of his Election Sermon. Though there is no pride of these kinds in Marcher, who has a petty job and no

particular status in society, there is a more subtle kind of pride in him, a kind that exults the ego privately. He knew that there was something that set him apart from other men, and in this setting-off, he brooded on his own affairs so much that he was unaware of others except as they concerned himself. At the opening of the story, he does not recollect accurately the details of the occasion with May in Italy, yet he vaguely recalls that she was something in his life. He would have liked to imagine that he had performed a heroic deed on her behalf or that they shared a dramatic moment. It would have suited his conception of himself. But her memory is more reliable, and she finally refers to his confession about himself which was the reason for their initial closeness. She asks, "Has it ever happened?" (p. 1101)

The differences in psychology of the characters can be accounted for by Hawthorne's association with the early psychologists who were primarily religious and ethical and by James's middle position before the post-Freudians.[9] Yet the psychology used by both authors was recognized early in criticism in 1918, by the then-upstart T. S. Eliot. After his unfortunate remark about the mind of James being so find that "no idea could violate it," he recognized the intelligence of James and called attention to the kinship between Hawthorne and James because of their use of psychology. He said that Hawthorne was the sole "English-writing predecessor of James whose characters are aware of each other."[10]

That this awareness - the personal relationship - was restricted to a few is obvious in the main characters in The Scarlet Letter and The Beast in the Jungle, yet Hawthorne also gives "a sense of the larger community of which his characters were part."[11] Thus there is the Puritan community, a social community, in The Scarlet Letter, but no real community in The Beast in the Jungle. There is, however, in James's story, the nameless mourner at the end from whom Marcher learns of his loss of passion and who may represent the rest of mankind. And a sense of isolation is marked in each work. Hester, Dimmesdale, and Chillingworth are isolated by sin from each other and from the community; Marcher is set off not only from a vague community but from the rest of mankind. Recall the passage in which May points out that they had been talked about but in reply to Marcher's selfish query says, "That's it. It's all that concerns me--to help you to pass for a man like another." (pp. 1113-14) And the sadness is that he is not like other men, that he is isolated by egotism and by fear of normal experience, of normal passion.

The symbolism in each work has been discussed in various ways by critics, although they do not always distinguish between symbolism and imagery as one might wish. Generally speaking, although both Hawthorne and James use this visual means to give depth to their fictions, their treatments are different. In Hawthorne's work, symbol tends toward moral allegory, and in James's toward ironic imagery.[12] The allegorical symbolism in The Scarlet Letter is easily noted in the scaffold, in the scarlet letter, in Pearl, in the forest, and in the contrast of light

and dark.[13]

It is curious to note criticism that couples the names of Hawthorne and James with their use of symbolism when one remembers what James had written of The Scarlet Letter in his life of Hawthorne. He praised the work as a masterpiece, but he objected to Hawthorne's use of symbols and allegory. From his later "The Art of Fiction," which showed how James emphasized correspondence to reality, his objection can be explained more precisely. He probably did not object to the use of symbols as such but only to those symbols which violate the natural law and human probability--and the scarlet letter in the sky and on Dimmesdale's breast are presented as if they do this violation, even with Hawthorne's careful comments about them.

James's own imagery in The Beast in the Jungle is found not to violate natural law or human probability. Because the story is seen only through the sensitive eyes of Marcher, the foreboding, the presentiment that he has about his life is given Marcher's imaginative concrete image. Note the first appearance of the image: "Something or other lay in wait for him, amid the twists and the turns of the months and the years, like a crouching beast in the jungle. It signified little whether the crouching beast were destined to slay him or to be slain. The definite point was the inevitable spring of the creature; and the definite lesson from that was that a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger-hunt." (p. 1107) Ironically thinking himself a man of feeling, Marcher creates the beast in his imagination from which May is excluded. Later, Marcher recoils from the recollection of the face of the creature, "more uncovered just then than it had been for a long while, of the imagination always with them. It had always had its incalculable moments of glaring out, quite as with the very eyes of the very Beast. . ." (p. 1111) The jungle which Marcher imagines as his life is not unlike the moral wilderness of the forest in The Scarlet Letter, but, again, it is his private imagining that creates it. Irony is also noted in the fire and passion suggested by the beast with its glaring eyes and by the violence of the forest-jungle which are the opposite of the qualities in Marcher. "This overcivilized, over-sensitive, middle-aged Prufrockian man is too timid to meet life on its terms, too proud to submit to passion and emotion."[14]

That life shown by Hawthorne and James had an underlying awareness of the universality of man and of his necessary relationship with his fellows is evident from psychological tensions. The "common doom" referred to by Marcher was something he would have snatched at as being enough for him even when the meaning of the beast was not clear to him. This is not unlike the "common bond and destiny" frequently referred to in the works of Hawthorne.[15]

The psychological soundness of both works helps to create the universality that makes each

a masterpiece. Despite man's necessary relation with other human beings, he is essentially alone--as much modern literature repeats to the point of dullness. But he can further isolate himself through sin, as in The Scarlet Letter, or he can do so by self-absorption, as in The Beast in the Jungle. Both works depend on a perception of values that are not material, both subordinate action and dialogue to an analysis of conduct, and both works have universal application despite their differences in approach and execution. They show a continuing tradition in American letters.

FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph Warren Beach, intro. The American by Henry James (New York, 1949), pp. vi-viii; Lyon Richardson, Henry James (New York, 1941), pp. xxi-xxiii; and Morton D. Zabel, The Portable Henry James (New York, 1951), p. 25. All of these discuss the nature of the spiritual or moral qualities of Hawthorne and James and touch upon their concepts of evil.

2. Marius Bewley, The Complex Fate (London, 1952) and Edwin Fussell, "Hawthorne, James and the Common Doom," American Quarterly, X (Winter 1958), 438-53, both tend to exaggerate the influence of Hawthorne on James.

3. Quoted in American Renaissance by F. O. Matthiessen (New York, 1941), p. 295.

4. "Nathaniel Hawthorne," Library of the World's Best Literature, ed. Charles Dudley Warner, XII (New York, 1897), 7061.

5. Richardson, p. xxxiv.

6. In The American Tradition in Literature, ed. Bradley, Beatty and Long, rev. ed. (New York, 1962). All references to "The Art of Fiction" are to this source.

7. Charles D. Hoffman, The Short Novels of Henry James (New York, 1957), pp. 98-99. Hoffman claims this is a recurrent theme in most of James's works and not only in the last period. He finds it as early as Daisy Miller.

8. In The American Tradition in Literature, p. 1121. Citations from The Beast in the Jungle in the text are to this source.

9. F. O. Matthiessen, Henry James: The Major Phase. (New York, 1944), p. 93.

10. In Literature in America, ed. Philip Rahv (New York, 1957), pp. 221-30.

11. Henry James: The Major Phase, p. 102.

12. Hoffman, p. 92.

13. Matthiessen in American Renaissance has a good discussion of the allegory and symbolism of The Scarlet Letter as well as additional references to Hawthorne and James.

14. Hoffman, p. 101.

15. Fussell, p. 438.